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SUBJECT: CYPRUS: CHURCH AND STATE CONTINUE TO CLASH

REF: A. NICOSIA 628

[1](#)B. NICOSIA 94

Classified By: Ambassador Frank Urbancic, Reason 1.4 (b).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Few would expect a chummy relationship between Cyprus's pro-solution, card-carrying Communist President Demetris Christofias and its hard-line nationalist, conservative archbishop, Chrysostomos II. Leader of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus since late 2006, the bombastic Archbishop, whose assumed name ironically translates to "Golden Mouth," campaigned against Christofias during the island's 2008 presidential race, first supporting incumbent President Tassos Papadopoulos and then DISY-supported challenger Ioannis Kasoulides. Christofias enjoyed no honeymoon from the Primate's criticism after his inauguration, with Chrysostomos blasting the new President's softer line toward Turkish Cypriots and efforts to rekindle Cyprus Problem negotiations. These long-opposed leaders seemingly reached an understanding in early August, however, and Chrysostomos announced publicly his support for Christofias's policies on the national problem -- although many snickered the arrangement had more to do with the government reshelving efforts to begin taxing Church income than with a common position on the Cyprus talks. Turkish Cypriot contacts viewed the alliance with alarm, arguing that the Greek Cypriot leader, in pacting with the anti-Turk Primate, had proven his lines were as hard as his predecessor's. The Communist-clerical perestroika would prove short-lived, however; at an August 19 event honoring diaspora Cypriots, Chrysostomos's second, the Bishop of Paphos, delivered his master's searing critique of Christofias's actions, which drew an equally-scalding rebuttal from the angry President. Since, media and opinion leaders have engaged in serious navel-gazing over free speech and the role of the Church in secular affairs. Within the institution itself -- it is anything but monolithic -- the pro-solution forces arrayed against Chrysostomos have redoubled outreach efforts, both to prepare the flock for the upcoming negotiations and to clarify that the Archbishop is but one bishop among many. END SUMMARY.

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No Long Walks in the Moonlight for These Two  
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[1](#)2. (C) Christofias's AKEL party, Cyprus's oldest, largest and most cohesive, bucked the post-Soviet breakup changes that transformed other European Communist parties into Social Democratic movements; hammer-and-sickles and Che Guevara portraits still decorate party HQ offices, including leader Christofias's. While they were never as anti-clerical as fellow Reds in countries like Spain, for example -- Christofias even told us shortly before taking office that "Jesus Christ was the first Communist" (Ref B) -- AKELites and the Orthodox Church of Cyprus could hardly be considered allies. In fact, Church-supported EOKA militants during the

1955-59 guerrilla campaign against Britain targeted AKEL leaders as well as colonial authorities and their Turkish Cypriot allies, tarring the Communists as sympathizers. With this history, one understands why Church leaders would oppose a Communist candidate and president.

¶3. (C) Chrysostomos the politician would make Machiavelli proud. In the multi-round, three-candidate ecclesiastical elections of 2006, he managed to play the two front-runners against each other to win election despite having garnered but eight percent of the popular vote. Nationalism dominates his thinking; when he speaks out (which is often, and rarely touching on spirituality), it is normally to disparage Turks or the Turkish Cypriot leadership, or to criticize pro-solution G/Cs. During the 2008 presidential campaign, early-on he allied with like-thinking Papadopoulos, whose re-election most opinion polls reported was certain. Chrysostomos even pronounced that the incumbent's DIKO organization "is my party." Few in Cyprus likely were more surprised than the Archbishop when Papadopoulos failed to advance on February 17, leaving right-of-center Kasoulides to face Christofias. Chrysostomos immediately backed the former, only to bat O-for-2 after the Communist candidate soundly defeated his DISY rival.

¶4. (SBU) In his inaugural speech, the new president voiced his determination to see Cyprus reunited, and soon set about improving the sour inter-communal climate that had dominated the Papadopoulos era. Gestures like inviting Turkish Cypriot journalists to a Palace press conference and addressing them briefly in Turkish helped break some ice, but also agitated hard-liners like Chrysostomos. They would only become more

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livid as Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat began meeting in March. The Archbishop, who months before had argued that those who supported a bizonal, bicomunal federation were "arming the hands of the Turks," protested loudly against recommencing leaders' meetings, employing Papadopoulos's line that the "ground is not yet sufficiently prepared."

¶5. (C) By late July, however, it seemed the Archbishop had had a revelation. Canvassing Cyprus's major party leaders regarding the expected announcement of full-fledged Cyprus talks, Chrysostomos later announced his support, "since without negotiations, there can be no settlement." The Archbishop concluded the round of calls with a stop at the Palace on July 31; in brief remarks afterward, he voiced full support for the President's handling of the Cyprus issue and the principles that would guide the talks. Christofias was not buying the Primate's about-face, however. In a candid moment during Ambassador Schlicher's July 31 exit call, the President confided his mistrust of Chrysostomos, his aim to keep the Church out of politics, and his intention to maintain close relations with pro-solution allies in the Holy Synod. Other Embassy contacts took an even more conspiratorial stance, claiming that Church finances underpinned the arrangement. According to their theory, Chrysostomos had offered his support to Christofias in exchange for the President shelving government plans, announced six weeks earlier, to seek over 100 million euros in back taxes from the Church.

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Alliance (of Convenience?) Troubles T/Cs  
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¶6. (C) Many Turkish Cypriots, however, saw matters differently. Despite our regular attempts at clarification, most T/Cs continue to equate the Archbishop with the Church of Cyprus, despite the latter's decentralized nature and the autonomy of other Synod members; they also consider the institution anti-Turk and anti-solution. Long-time T/C leader Rauf Denktash, in fact, felt vindicated over reports that Christofias and Chrysostomos's positions had converged.

At an August 12 meeting with PolOffs, the famously intransigent Denktash labeled Christofias "a nationalist Papadopoulos clone" who was unlikely to negotiate a solution in good faith. If he were Talat, Denktash would demand an explanation from the Greek Cypriot leader, since the arrangement between the two G/Cs could not conceivably jibe with settlement modalities that Talat and Christofias had been discussing since March 23. Denktash's suspicions of the Church's alleged re-insertion into Cyprus Problem negotiations were shared by Turkish "Embassy" Political Chief Levent Eler on August 21 (and we would not be surprised if his observations found their way into formal reporting to Ankara.)

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Make-up Begets Break-up  
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¶17. (U) Rapprochement between Church and State would prove short-lived. At a high-profile conference for diaspora Cypriots August 19, the Bishop of Paphos, an ultra-nationalist whom many believe pens the Primate's pronouncements, addressed participants on the Archbishop's behalf. With Christofias ten feet away, he blasted the President's drive for "Cypriot solution to the Cyprus Problem," arguing that it downgraded the conflict from one of invasion/occupation to merely a bicomunal dispute. He criticized the President's acceptance of a rotating presidency (between T/Cs and G/Cs) in the unified federal Cyprus, as well as Christofias's decision to allow Turkish Cypriots to pass through an as-yet-unopened crossing point en route to a battle commemoration in the T/C enclave of Kokkina. Enraged upon mounting the dais, Christofias put aside his prepared remarks and counter-attacked.

¶18. (SBU) "Ours is not a theocratic state," he proclaimed, eyes fixed on the Paphos bishop, "but a partnership (G/C and T/C) state based on the 1960 agreements." Disparaging the sometimes outrageous, overly nationalistic words of earlier speakers, the President promised that continued "patriotic fanfares" would lead only to catastrophe a la 1974. It became even more personal when Christofias shouted that he would take patriotism lessons from no one, and reminded the audience that "the President (using the third-person) had won election with 53 percent electoral support, not eight or 10 or 15 percent." The crowd was shocked, and paid little attention to the substantive portions of Christofias's speech.

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¶19. (C) In the hours and days following the blow-up, a half-dozen MFA diplomats, even younger "true believers" staffing the hard-line Cyprus Question division, privately applauded Christofias's remarks and claimed the out-of-touch Chrysostomos deserved a rebuke. Figures closer to the President seemed delighted with public reaction, with Government Spokesman Stephanos Stephanou telling us August 20 that unofficial pulse-taking showed most Cypriots behind the President. Analytical media pieces began appearing on August 22, such as daily Politis's point-counterpoint concerning the Church's role in politics. Did Church leaders enjoy unfettered free speech like rank-and-file Cypriots? the daily queried. Or did the special relationship -- "the Church is the people, and the people are the Church," one theologian wrote -- preclude criticism of the President, who, after all won Cypriots' support in February?

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Church Leaders Split Over Politics  
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¶10. (U) Despite the prominence of Archbishop Chrysostomos II, great autonomy exists within the Church of Cyprus. Its highest body, the Holy Synod, comprises 10 bishops/metropolitans and four vice-bishops, and all are empowered to act freely in their respective territories;

statements made by Chrysostomos and/or other bishops do not necessarily represent the entire church. Decisions on doctrine or policy require Holy Synod concurrence, in most cases via majority vote, not unanimity.

¶11. (C) At a meeting with Embassy staff August 21, Bishop of Tamasou-Orinis Isaiah described a Church hierarchy cleaved in two over the President's handling of the Cyprus Problem. Five of 10 Synod bishops -- himself, Kykkos (Nikiforos), Morphou (Neophytos), Famagusta (Vasilios), and Kiton (Chrysostomos) -- enjoyed close ties with Chrysostomos and backed his pro-solution tack. They are actively supporting the government's efforts by engaging opinion leaders within their dioceses to "sell" the benefits of a bizonal, bicommunal solution, Isaiah revealed. At the grass roots, parish priests are delivering sermons "heavy on coexistence and respect for diversity of race, religion, and ethnicity." Bicommunal outreach also receives high-level attention; Nikiforos deserved special mention for his campaign to include Turkish Cypriots, who once populated T/C and mixed villages throughout his territory, in high-profile Church activities such as an upcoming visit to Moscow.

¶12. (C) A wide ideological gulf separated their camp from the hard-liners, Isaiah continued -- the Archbishop, his lieutenant Paphos (Georgios), Kyrenia (Pavlos), Limassol (Athanassios), and Trimithous (Varnavas). All five feared the changes a solution might bring, and actually preferred the status quo or even partition to a federal solution of the type currently envisioned. Paphos represented the toughest nut; the Archbishop was a "decent" colleague until he tapped Paphos -- "the brains behind the throne" -- as his aide. Isaiah compared the hard-line bishop's ideology to that of Tassos Papadopoulos, although he could not confirm rumors that the former President had played a role in this latest verbal attack on Christofias. The anti-solution bishops would continue to utilize friendly media outlets like leading daily Phileleftheros, Sigma TV and Radio Proto to project their views; the pro-solution camp could count only on newspapers Politis and Alithia.

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Comment  
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¶13. (C) "Blurry" long described the line separating Church and State in Cyprus, whether in Ottoman times -- when the Sultan recognized the Archbishop both as spiritual and secular leader of the Greek Cypriot community, or more recently -- when Archbishop Makarios continued the ethnarch tradition by winning election as Cyprus's first president in ¶1960. Times have changed significantly since Makarios's death in 1977, but it seems the current occupant of the throne of St. Barnabas is reluctant to adapt. To illustrate, polling shows that a majority of G/Cs pay little heed to overtly political pronouncements from their Church leaders. Yet Chrysostomos was front and center during the 2008 presidential campaign, supporting first incumbent Papadopoulos and then challenger Kasoulides. Christofias's eventual victory lowered further the Primate's standing as a political force on the island.

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¶14. (C) The Church can still exert influence on the national issue, however. In 2004, certain members adopted the hardest of "NO" votes against the Annan Plan, and the current Archbishop was at the forefront in his then-role as Bishop of Paphos. While the Holy Synod's "blessing" will not guarantee success in the current negotiating effort, it could help in rebutting those who consider a reunified, federal Cyprus inimical to Greek Cypriot interests. The organizational and outreach efforts of Bishop Isaiah and the pro-solution side of the Synod is encouraging.  
Urbancic